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## It's been a long road to recognition as Matildas face their shot at glory

The players in Germany have matured, writes Sebastian Hassett.

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Tomorrow night, the Matildas will square off against Sweden in what is arguably the biggest match in the 32-year history of the team.

The World Cup quarter-final in Augsburg will be beamed around the world, and players such as Kyah Simon, Lisa De Vanna and Collette McCallum have the chance to write their names in the history books should they win.



Glory days ... Amy Taylor playing for the Matildas. GETTY IMAGES

No senior Australian team - male or female - has reached the semi-final of a World Cup. If they make it, they are likely to come up against Germany, champions in 2003 and 2007, and the host nation this time around. Should they overcome the odds and make the final, it will be the biggest Australian sporting event of the year.

And yet it all began so humbly. Australia competed in the 1975 Asian Cup, finishing third, but were not formally established as a team until three years later, drawing their first match 2-2 against New Zealand at Sutherland's Seymour Park.

They were so loosely organised they wouldn't face a team other than the Football Ferns until 1983. They wouldn't play another tournament until 1986.

Eventually, they began to gain traction, winning the Oceania Women's Championships for the first time in 1995, at the fifth attempt, and qualifying for the World Cup of the same year.

In 1997, 18-year-old defender Amy Taylor came into the team. She recalls the time fondly, but admits it wasn't a slick operation.

"We trained in the hand-me-downs we got from the men's team," she said yesterday. "That period had its challenges but we never really complained about it. We were barely recognised by anyone, and the girls weren't paid for their efforts, but we just got on with it and did the best we could. Everyone tried to maintain a professional approach."



Post-Matildas ... sports anchor for WIN television Amy Taylor, as she is today.

As time wore on, the expectations around the Matildas began to grow, and the commitment required was rising all the time.

"The sport has always had a really professional coaching staff, support staff and training facilities but over the journey of my career, the levels and demands really increased," she says. "We had a different [payment] pooling structure [to] the girls today, and didn't have the opportunity to play as many games, and we certainly weren't in a position to train full-time ... It was long way from what we're seeing today."

In an effort to raise money, the Matildas came up with a nude calendar in 2000. Taylor, now the sports anchor for WIN television in Wollongong, was the face of the calendar, and grimaces at the memory.

"I think it's fantastic that this generation is being recognised on its merits," she replies when asked if she's relieved today's players don't need to resort to such stunts.

Hoping to maximise their moment in the sun, the Matildas have become their own self-

publicists in recent months, hitting the hustings to let the world know they're friendly, accessible and more than just footballers.

There are YouTube clips and Facebook pages and, most significantly, most of the squad is on Twitter, including coach Tom Sermanni and assistant coach Spencer Prior, with fans getting access to the players' lives they could only dream about with the Socceroos, whose rare contact with the public - even the media - is controlled by the FFA.

After much lobbying, the FFA has relaxed its policy with the Matildas in an effort to let them build public personas. And the media have responded, providing vastly improved coverage compared with previous tournaments.

"It's fantastic that they're getting the coverage that they're getting but I think they've deserved it for a little bit longer," Taylor says.

Still, some believe it hasn't been nearly enough. Veteran ABC television commentator Peter Wilkins, who has called numerous Matildas matches, and covers the W-League every Saturday, says media coverage of their efforts is still pitiful.

"I don't think there's been anywhere near the amount of merited coverage, and many media organisations still treat the Matildas as they have done in the past - contemptuously," he said yesterday. "I see the media as being far too reactive rather than proactive, and that is 100 per cent the case with women's football. There's still a terrible stigma that women shouldn't be playing football or the public needn't care, which is an anachronism of the highest order."

Wilkins says Australians should be embracing the Matildas the same way they've done with the Socceroos in recent years.

"We pride ourselves on many things in Australia but in Germany, the US and other countries, they've grown up so much more," he says.